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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 000430

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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: PUK REFORM WING GATHERS MOMENTUM -  
RESEND

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[1](#)B. 08 BAGHDAD 3836

Classified By: Regional Coordinator Lucy Tamlyn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. A group of PUK members led by former PUK Deputy Secretary General Nawshirwan Mustafa is confident that their reform agenda will lead them to prevail over other PUK contenders in the contest for PUK leadership in a post-Talabani world. For the time being, this group does not comprise an official faction. But they are a force that is commanding more attention, and one that the Talabani wing will have to defeat or co-opt if they hope to remain in charge of the PUK when Talabani is no longer on the political scene. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) In recent months, RRTOff met with the following political leaders in Sulaimaniyah to discuss the future of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK): Kamal Fuad (PUK Politburo), Omer Said Ali (PUK Politburo), Jalal Jawhar (PUK Politburo), Mustafa Said Qadir (PUK Politburo), Fareed Asasard (PUK Leadership Committee and head of the Kurdistan Center for Strategic Studies, the PUK's think tank), Nawshirwan Mustafa (former PUK Deputy Secretary General), Mohammed Tawfiq (former member of the PUK Politburo), Dana Majed (Governor of Sulaimaniyah), Hewa Jaff (Director of Foreign Affairs, Sulaimaniyah Governorate), Nawzad Al-Jaff (Chairman, North Bank), and Halo Ibrahim Ahmed (Jalal Talabani's brother-in-law).

The Breach within the PUK

[1](#)3. (C) The PUK reformist movement grabbed the public's attention this past September, when Nawshirwan Mustafa published in his newspaper, Rozhnama, a three-part manifesto entitled &We and Them, the &We8 being the reformists and the &Them8 being those in power who oppose reform. Thus began a series of attacks and counter-attacks between the two sides that were widely covered by the local media. PUK Politburo member and Spokesman Malah Bakhtiar even challenged Nawshirwan to debate him on television after these articles were published (the debate never materialized).

[1](#)4. (C) On October 7, the breach grew more acrimonious after a group of UK-based PUK dissidents published a declaration announcing the formation of a new group within the PUK, The Movement for Democratic Change (reftel A). The manifesto called for party reform and condemned the PUK as a corrupt, &near totalitarian regime8 that violated human rights, failed to provide essential public services, and harmed the economy. In response, Talabani called for the PUK Politburo to expel them from the party. But in a sign of dissension at the top of the PUK, he only prevailed by a 6-4 vote. While the four Politburo members who opposed Talabani argued in committee against the expulsion on procedural grounds, they confided to RRTOff that the dissidents &spoke what was on

everybody's mind.8

Who are the Reformists?

15. (C) All of our Sulaimaniyah contacts agree that Nawshirwan is the undisputed leader of the PUK reformists. At age 31, he helped to found the PUK and became the party's first deputy secretary general, second in rank only to Talabani. During the 1991 Kurdish uprising, he served as a senior Pesh merga commander. After resigning his party post in 2006 over policy differences with Talabani, Nawshirwan established an independent newspaper that serves as a voice of the reformist movement. In addition, he has written several books about Kurdish history. (See septel for a more detailed profile of Nawshirwan.)

16. (C) Two of Nawshirwan's strongest supporters draw somewhat contrasting portraits of him. Governor Dana Majed praises Nawshirwan as a true leader, a powerful, self-made man who has built up his support without outside help and who is in touch with the people. According to Majeed, Nawshirwan is popular throughout the Kurdistan Region and even among Kurds in Turkey and Iran. The head of PUK's Kurdistan Center for Strategic Studies, Fareed Asasard, says that Nawshirwan is highly regarded as a strategic thinker who has played an important role in making things happen in the PUK, with a clean reputation free from any hint of corruption. But Asasard also describes Nawshirwan as a moody person who sometimes makes decisions based on his moods and does not mingle with "the people." Asasard also sees his base of support as being mainly in Sulaimaniyah.

BAGHDAD 00000430 002 OF 004

Nawshirwan's Inner Circle

17. (C) Nawshirwan's inner circle consists of five people. Closest to him is Muhammed Tawfiq, a UK-trained engineer who resigned together with Nawshirwan from the PUK Politburo in December 2006. Mohammed Tawfiq serves as Nawshirwan's deputy in his media operation. The other four members of the inner circle consist of the PUK Politburo members who opposed Talabani's decision to expel the UK-based PUK dissidents from the party: Osman Haji Mahmoud (PUK Minister of the Interior), Mustafa Said Qadir (Deputy Minister for Pesh merga Affairs), Jalal Jawhar, and Omer Said Ali. Together, they make up one third of the Politburo.

The Reformist Platform

18. (C) The reformists identify corruption as the major problem in Sulaimaniyah. To combat corruption and increase transparency they say they seek to:

- establish a truly independent judiciary that will root out corrupt officials at all levels;
- eliminate party interference in the day-to-day affairs of the KRG by having ministries that are run by technocrats, not party hacks;
- have military and security forces that report to the government, not the parties;
- ensure respect for human rights as outlined in the Iraqi constitution.

19. (SBU) Their agenda for PUK institutional reform calls for imposing a ten-year term limit on senior level party positions, ensuring a democratic decision-making process and holding party congresses every two years to elect a new slate of leaders. (Note: In its 33-year history, the PUK has held only two congresses. PUK has announced that its next congress will take place in May 2009. End note).

¶10. (SBU) On the economic front, the reformists advocate placing a greater reliance on the free market, paying more attention to developing infrastructure, providing better levels of essential public services, and developing the region's agricultural sector to eliminate its dependence on oil revenues. With regard to relations with Baghdad, the reformists believe that Kirkuk and other disputed areas should be incorporated one day into the Kurdistan Region, but they also state that they do not seek an independent Kurdistan.

Who supports the Reformists?

¶11. (C) The reformist leadership claim that their strength within the PUK is broad and deep, and that they are popular among the public at large, a public that is very unhappy with the state of affairs in Sulaimaniyah. Qadir, referring to the pyramid-like structure of the party, says that while the reformists may only have a few supporters at the top, their support steadily increases the farther down one goes toward the base, where the support is especially robust.

¶12. (C) Mustafa Said Qadir claims that some people who are identified as opponents of Nawshirwan actually work secretly with the reformists. According to Omer Said Ali, a majority of the PUK members support reform, but many of them are afraid to reveal their true feelings because they owe their livelihood to their party membership and fear that they would be punished if they openly expressed their true feelings. One reason the PUK dissidents in the UK were able to speak out, according to Fareed Asasard, is because they do not draw salaries from the party.

The Reformists, Electoral Strategy

¶13. (C) Nawshirwan believes his political strategy is grounded on the premise that nothing will change within the PUK leadership as long as Talabani remains in power. According to Nawshirwan, Talabani holds all the power in his hands, especially financial power, and he has used this power and the force of his personality to attract and retain supporters, including members of other parties. Such is Talabani's power that if a PUK congress were held right now, Nawshirwan predicts it would be a show congress, not a real one, with delegates hand-picked by Talabani and his allies, not elected by the party rank and file. In Mustafa Said Qadir's words: "Wherever he (Talabani) is, that's

BAGHDAD 00000430 003 OF 004

where the strength of the party is.

¶14. (C) For the time being, Nawshirwan states that he is content to remain outside the PUK leadership. Despite entreaties by distinguished party elder statesmen like Umar Shaykhmous, and Talabani himself, for Nawshirwan to come back and "let bygones be bygones," Nawshirwan states that has no interest in holding a position of authority within the PUK at the present time. He explains that he prefers to stay on the outside, run his media operation (which enables him to publicize the reformist agenda), and wait until the time is right to make his move.

¶15. (C) Despite having divided the party into "We" and "Them" in his editorial manifesto, Nawshirwan states that he has no plans to suddenly make over the PUK. In fact, he speaks firmly against the idea of a coup. He told us that he favors gradual change; stability, not unrest. The old guard, he says, must be pushed out slowly, not all at once. He said that he values their experience, and would combine that experience with the energy of the younger generation.

The Reformists Assess Their Opponents

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¶16. (C) Nawshirwan cites Kosrat Rasoul, Barham Salih, and Malah Bakhtiar as the leaders of the Talabani wing. In Nawshirwan,s assessment, this wing would command support from only about 200 influential PUK party members, and that other support is soft and would very likely shift to his side in a post-Talabani era.

Kosrat Rasoul  
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¶17. (C) According to PUK by-laws, Kosrat, as the party's Deputy Secretary General, will automatically assume the post of Secretary General on an interim basis once Talabani leaves office. However, there is a consensus among our contacts that Kosrat,s ill health will make it impossible for him to succeed Talabani as the next permanent secretary general, despite his strong ambition to do so. Moreover, the Reformists also say that Kosrat is not popular in Sulaimaniyah, the PUK,s home base. According to them, most of Kosrat,s support comes from Erbil, some but not all of the Pesh merga (Nawshirwan, too, has Pesh merga support), many but not all of the tribal leaders, and assorted people he has done favors for over the years.

¶18. (C) Nonetheless, both Dana Majed and Fareed Asasard believe that Kosrat will work with Nawshirwan (in line with Nawshirwan,s own stated preference for stability and gradual change). Asasard believes that mutual interests will push Nawshirwan and Kosrat to work together, and that the two should be able to strike a deal to divide authority between them. Moreover, he feels that their professional rivalry has not necessarily led to personal animosity. For example, Mustafa Said Qadir, who fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Kosrat as a Pesh merga, still considers Kosrat a close friend.

Barham Salih  
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¶19. (C) While respected as a competent technocrat and a good manager who was effective and popular when he served as Prime Minister of Sulaimaniyah, the consensus of the reformists is that Barham currently has no local base of support. Dana Majed asserts that Barham,s support in Sulaimaniyah has largely evaporated ever since he went to Baghdad to become Deputy Prime Minister, because he promised to do a lot for the people of Sulaimaniyah but did not deliver.

¶20. (C) The reformists claim that Barham acknowledges that he needs to spend more time back in Sulaimaniyah re-establishing his ties in order to ensure his political future. The only real support for Barham as party leader, Dana Majed asserts, comes from the Americans. Nawshirwan further dismisses Barham as &part of the corrupt present set-up.<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Said Qadir sees Barham as likely serving in the party's third position, immediately after Nawshirwan and Kosrat. (Comment: Mustafa Said Qadir,s comments reflect the extent to which the reformists value party unity and retention of experienced leaders. This approach may not be consistent with the dramatic reform proposed by the group. End Comment.)

Malah Bakhtiar  
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BAGHDAD 00000430 004 OF 004

¶21. (C) Although our contacts do not give PUK Politburo member Malah Bakhtiar any chance at succeeding Talabani, they respect his considerable power in the PUK. Apart from the fact that his daughter married Talabani,s son Bafil, his influence stems from his position of responsibility supervising local civic organizations, which puts him in contact with a great many people, especially community

leaders. However, his relationship with Nawshirwan is poor. Mustafa Said Qadir mentioned him as one of only two persons in the PUK Politburo who would find it difficult if not impossible to work with Nawshirwan. (The other is the head of the PUK Organizational Office, Arsalan Bayez.)

#### The Talabani Family

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¶22. (C) Two other names come up in discussions about the PUK succession: Jalal Talabani's wife, Hero, and his son, Qubad.

Hero Talabani is a media magnate who runs two television channels and is active in charitable and cultural circles. However, our contacts believe that Hero owes her considerable power and fortune to her husband and will cease to be a factor when he is no longer on the scene. (Comment: As one of the first female Peshmerga and the daughter of Ibrahim Ahmed, one of the original founders of the KDP, Hero Talabani still retains important political capital. End Comment.)

¶23. (C) While Nawshirwan calls Qubad Talabani a &nobody,<sup>8</sup> Qadir says he could have a role if he wanted one. Hewa Jaff, who is personally close to Qubad (but who has also maintained strong ties with the reformists), points out that Qubad has excellent relations with the KDP, especially with KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, who invited Qubad to join him on a visit to meet with Sistani last year. Hewa Jaff speculates that if Qubad is not offered a substantive role in the PUK, he will be offered an important position in the KRG, working closely with Nechirvan. (Note: As KRG Representative in Washington, D.C., Qubad has been residing in the United States for the last twenty years. When asked directly about his future plans, he informed Baghdad PolOff on November 1 that he was not seeking the PUK Secretary General position or the KRG Prime Minister position and was unsure where he could "fit in nicely and have the maximum impact." End Note.)

#### The Role of the Tribes

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¶24. (C) Nawzad Jaff, whose uncle and grandfather were leaders of the powerful Jaff tribe), says that he and his family strongly support Nawshirwan, as do a number of other tribal leaders. However, Mustafa Said Qadir notes that Nawshirwan cannot count on the support of the tribes because he is not considered friendly to a strong tribal-based system. Moreover, Kosrat remains very popular with tribal leaders, whom he courted assiduously during his time as Prime Minister.

#### Comment

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¶25. (C) Not for the first time, the PUK faces reform challenges from within. As he has in the past Talabani acknowledges the rumblings. On December 3, he announced his own reform plan, consisting of six committees to tackle corruption and a five-point letter delegating Kosrat Rasoul and Barham Salih equal authority to manage PUK affairs on Talabani's behalf (reftel B). He has also solicited views from PUK members on separating the party from governance structures. Talabani has also made an effort to spend more time in Sulaimaniyah on PUK business, and has held large-scale PUK meetings each month since his return to Iraq in September 2008. But it remains to be seen if these reforms are meaningful, and if so, whether they will co-opt or eclipse the reformists. For the time being, the reformists represent a force that is gathering strength, one that the Talabani wing will have to deal with if they hope to remain in charge of the PUK when Talabani is no longer on the scene.

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